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## Judge: Children No Longer Shackled' in Courtroom, Touts 'Transformative Change'



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*From left: Hinds County Sheriff Tyree Jones poses with Hinds County Youth Court Judge Carlyn Hicks at an event on Nov. 18, 2022, where the latter shared the accomplishments of her office. The judge presented the sheriff with the 2022 Champion for Children award. Photo by Kayode Crown*

JACKSON, Miss.—Hinds County Youth Court Judge Carlyn Hicks' first juvenile-delinquency case in July 2020 involved a 12-year-old girl who came into her courtroom in shackles that summer. "She sat at the witness table in front of the bench alone," Hicks recalled as she addressed a captive audience at an event held on Nov. 17, 2022, at the Henley-Young-Patton Juvenile Justice Center.

"She looked up at me with fear in her eyes and uncertainty. Her attorney was present, but his table was several feet away from her to my right," Hicks said during her "2022 State of the Child in Hinds County" report.

"Her charge was disturbing the family peace; the fact was that she poured grease on the kitchen floor, and she missed the bus," the judge continued. "This child had the police called on her for this. They arrested her. They put her in the back of the police car. She was booked to the detention center for disturbing the family peace."

The youth court judge, who ran unopposed for the position during the Nov. 8, 2022, general election, added, "The DYS (Division of Youth Services) counselor began to make recommendations in court, and I soon realized that they had not spoken to that child very much."



The Division of Youth Services, which is under the Mississippi Department of Human Services, focuses on juvenile delinquency and is located at 1000 N. Lamar Ave., Jackson, Miss. 39201. It provides counseling, probation, and supervision services at home and education, rehabilitation, and treatment services to children committed to institutional care. John Davis, the agency's executive director from 2016 to 2019, pleaded guilty in September to federal and state charges (https://www.mississippifreepress.org/27551/ex-mississippi-welfare-leader-indicted-on-federal-conspiracy-fraud-charges) relating to the misuse of funds at the agency.

Hicks said Thursday that the girl who appeared before her two years before lived with her aunt, who regularly used the threat of arrest to intimidate her. "As time went on, we would discover the young girl had been subjected to horrendous child abuse at the hands of her aunt whom she lived with," the judge said. "The threat of calling the police had been used as a source of fear, trauma, and—most importantly—control. She had already been shifted from place to place, and this she was made to believe was her only option for a home."



(https://www.mississippifreepress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Henley-Young-Patton-Juvenile-Justice-Center\_cred-Kayode-Crown.png)

*Scores gathered at the Henley-Young-Patton Juvenile Justice Center in Jackson, Miss., on Nov. 17, 2022, to listen to Hinds County Youth Court Judge Carlyn Hicks. Photo by Kayode Crown*

Hicks did not share what ultimately happened to the girl but said the incident made her rethink the procedures and practices at the court to which the Mississippi Supreme Court had appointed her earlier that July, following the retirement of Judge Melvin V. Priester Sr., who previously held the position since 2011. Gov. Tate Reeves would later extend Hicks' tenure until January 2022. She then stood for a special election to officially fill the position on Nov. 2, 2021, and won.

### **Judge: 'Children Sit with Their Attorneys'**

On Thursday, Hicks detailed some of the procedural changes she made to the court, including not shackling children in the courtroom. "Children are not shackled in the courtroom at Hinds County Youth Court; they have an opportunity to address the court; their DYS counselors meet with them and their families frequently to inform them of their recommendations to the court," she said. "And that's just the beginning of the transformative change we've been able to do for the betterment of children and their families in the fair administration of justice."

"In Hinds County Youth Court now, children sit with their attorneys," she continued. "They also are able to communicate effectively with their attorney; children meet with their attorneys before court, not during the court proceeding, so that they can adequately prepare for court."

Other efforts include meeting regularly with and communicating court protocols and developing relationships with law-enforcement officers. They "also conduct field assessments to determine levels of threat and weigh whether there are alternatives to detaining youth of nonviolent





(https://www.mississippifreepress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Melvin-Priester-Sr.\_courtesy.jpg)

*Judge Melvin V. Priester Sr. (pictured) resigned in 2020, citing health reasons, and the Mississippi Supreme Court appointed Carlyn Hicks to the position in the interim. She stood unopposed at the general election on Nov. 8, 2022 for the same position. Photo courtesy Melvin Priester Sr.*

U.S. Southern District of Mississippi Court Judge Daniel P. Jordan III signed an order on Oct. 13, 2022, removing Henley-Young-Patton Detention Center from under a consent decree that had been in place since March 2012 to prevent child abuse at the center. At that time it housed children adjudged as being delinquent, but it now also houses juveniles charged as adults, who are under the purview of the circuit court, and not the youth court.

Hinds County Board of Supervisors Attorney Tony Gaylor told the Mississippi Free Press last month that the county was able to show it had “actually reached compliance with the mandates of the United States Constitution” in reaction to the lifting of the consent decree.  
(https://www.mississippifreepress.org/28867/hinds-juvenile-detention-center-comes-off-consent-decree-as-county-celebrates)

Hicks said the children at the detention facility have access to mental-health and medical services and engage in recreational activities.

“Educationally disconnected youth have the opportunity to engage in credit-recovery programs and now pre-GED programs as well as a law-literacy program through the school; they connect to community-based mentorship programs, which act as community alternatives to detention with structured community-led programs,” she said.

**Reducing Number of Children in Foster Care**

The youth court hears child-protection cases, where the court determines whether to remove children from their homes and put them in foster care. Hicks explained that since July 2020, she had seen a reduction in children in foster care in Hinds County from 396 to 210. The Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services said that there are approximately 4,000 children in foster care statewide (https://www.mdcp.ms.gov/programs/foster-care).

Hicks said the reduction alleviated “years of stagnant backlog, where children have been in foster care for seven, 10 or even 12 years.”

“Their plans were adoption, but they languished in foster care,” she added. “They were simply waiting on their forever homes, and it felt as though it took forever.”



In Gov. Reeves' fiscal-year 2024 budget (<https://www.mdcp.ms.gov/programs/foster-care>)

recommendation released in November 2022 highlighted the need to reduce the adoption backlog by increasing funding for child protective services full-time attorneys by \$3 million. He explained that doing this would enable the agency to “handle all adoption cases (from) start to finish. ... By allocating this \$3 million, Mississippi will reduce backlogs and help to ensure that no foster child is left behind.”



([https://www.mississippifreepress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Henley-Young-Patton-Juvenile-Justice-Center-inside\\_cred-Kayode-Crown.png](https://www.mississippifreepress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Henley-Young-Patton-Juvenile-Justice-Center-inside_cred-Kayode-Crown.png))

*A cross-section of the audience inside Henley-Young-Patton Juvenile Justice Center listened to Hinds County Youth Court Judge Carlyn Hicks present her 2022 State of the Child in Hinds County to the public on Nov. 17, 2022. Photo by Kayode Crown*

In 2020, Hinds County led the state in the number of children removed from homes following abuse and neglect allegations, with a total of 396 children. The Mississippi Administrative Office of Courts reported that within one year of Hicks' appointment, “241 Hinds County children have exited the foster care system, and of those, 185 went back to their family—either parents or other family members.”

([https://courts.ms.gov/news/2021/06.28.21%20Hinds%20reunification.php#:~:text=Judge%20Hudson%20was%20appointed%](https://courts.ms.gov/news/2021/06.28.21%20Hinds%20reunification.php#:~:text=Judge%20Hudson%20was%20appointed%20)

“Since 2020, there have been 49 children who have been successfully adopted out of foster care into loving and lasting homes in Hinds County and another 28 awaiting their court dates,” Hicks continued in her address on Thursday.

Hicks said out of the total case referrals for juvenile delinquency and child abuse and neglect to her court since July 2021, the top five zip codes by referrals are 39206 (176), 39204 (305), 39209 (280), 39212 (367) and 39213 (423), from a total of 2,358 referrals with 1,235 relating to child abuse and neglect and the 1,235 relating to delinquency.

The judge challenged people in the community, including “educational leaders, service providers, church leaders, non-profit organizational leaders, schools, agency providers, and good neighbors,” to address the needs in those zip codes. She called on willing collaborators to “meet the unmet needs of children, to meet the unmet needs of families, to give a concerted effort to collaborative problem solving and solution development.”

The Thursday event featured awards for various law-enforcement officers and child protection-service staff working with the court. The Jackson chapter of Jack and Jill of America Inc (<https://www.jacksonmsjackandjill.org>). received the Volunteer of the Year Award. “They bring the resources, they bring the capital, they bring the people, and I have been overwhelmed with their support,” the judge said of the group.